

Indian Mounds of Wisconsin

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Book Reviews and Notices

Indian Mounds of Wisconsin, by Robert A. Birmingham and Leslie E. Eisenberg. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000. xv, 245 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

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The thousands of earthen mounds that once dotted the midwestern landscape are arguably the best-known type of prehistoric site in the region and were the first to attract archeological attention. In *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin*, Robert A. Birmingham and Leslie E. Eisenberg detail the history of mound research in Wisconsin, a state that boasts the highest concentration of mounds in the Midwest, and offer answers to decades-old questions: "Who built the mounds, when, and why?" Although this readable text focuses on Wisconsin, the authors chronicle historical events directly relevant to Iowa, which shared in some of the same research and in prehistoric cultural traditions not delimited by modern state boundaries.

The tradition of mound building in the upper Midwest spanned the Woodland period, from about 800 B.C.E. to 1200 C.E. Many Woodland mounds, especially the earliest, served as burial sepulchers. Late Woodland mounds apparently had more varied forms and functions. The authors describe the changing types and purposes of the mounds throughout their history. The book's focus is the Late Woodland period, 700–1200 C.E., when the stunning and enigmatic zoomorphic-shaped effigy mounds were created in southern Wisconsin and Minnesota and northern Iowa and Illinois.

Almost one-third of the text is devoted to the history of mound research in Wisconsin and the upper Midwest. The authors adroitly interweave this history with the evolution of scientific archeology and the development of American anthropology, and with changing attitudes towards Indian peoples over the past two centuries. Although the attempt to determine who built the mounds inspired their earliest study and proceeds to this day, mound investigations reflect the evolving methodological and theoretical tenets of the profession of archeology and, to an extent, the perspectives and concerns of society at large.

As early as 1829, researchers suggested a connection between the effigy mounds and the Chiwere Siouan-speaking tribes (including the Ho-Chunk or Winnebago, Ioway, and Oto) who occupied much of the effigy mound region at the time of historic contact. Although there are no surviving firsthand accounts of any one of these groups building mounds, modern descendants recognized the effigy mounds as part of their shared cultural heritage. Twentieth-century archeological researchers challenged the Ho-Chunk-effigy mound link. Controlled excavations and tighter temporal classification of recovered materials demonstrated the presence of an Oneota archeological tradition that followed that of the Late Woodland effigy mound builders and ended with the earliest documented Chiwere Siouan presence in the region.

Birmingham and Eisenberg argue that the Oneota descended from Late Woodland peoples, and that Siouan Chiwere-speakers such as the Ho-Chunk are descendants of the Oneota and as such can count themselves as the cultural descendants of effigy mound builders. They explain the apparent lack of conformity in the archeological record as a reflection of the changing social and ceremonial structure of Late Woodland times. The authors also interpret parallels between the cosmology underlying the effigy mounds and the belief systems of modern native midwestern peoples. Expanding on the ideas of R. Clark Mallam and Robert Hall, with supporting evidence from a recent distribution study of Wisconsin mound groups, they suggest that the forms and spatial relationship of effigy mounds mimic a cosmological division of the universe into upper and lower worlds that is retained today in the ideology, clan symbolism, and kinship structure of native midwestern peoples. The authors propose that effigy mounds thus served as "maps of ancient belief systems."

The question of who constructed these monuments is no longer just academic but has legal ramifications. Mound sites are protected by state legislation in both Wisconsin and Iowa, recognizing their status as prehistoric cemeteries and sacred places; and federal law requires the repatriation of mound contents to those tribes that can demonstrate a cultural affiliation. As the authors show, demonstrating such a connection is complex and requires a careful consideration of whether modern native peoples have converging or diverging origins. The authors conclude that "effigy mound ceremonialism could have crossed social boundaries," and that "most Native American groups with ancient roots in the state [including the Algonquian-speaking Menominee] are descendants of mound builders" (181). *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin* will likely draw Iowa readers to similar conclusions about the monuments of their own state.

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